



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

USCIRF HEARING SUMMARY:

May 2022

# WOMEN'S ROLES IN ADVANCING INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Nadine Maenza  
*Chair*

Nury Turkel  
*Vice Chair*

### Commissioners

Anurima Bhargava

James W. Carr

Frederick A. Davie

Khizr Khan

Sharon Kleinbaum

Tony Perkins

Erin D. Singhsinsuk  
*Executive Director*

### USCIRF's Mission

*To advance international freedom of religion or belief, by independently assessing and unflinchingly confronting threats to this fundamental right.*

On March 8, 2022, International Women's Day, the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom ([USCIRF](#)) held a hearing on [Women's Roles in Advancing International Religious Freedom](#). This hearing highlighted the vital, yet often overlooked, role women play in protecting freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) internationally.



USCIRF Chair [Nadine Maenza](#) led the hearing, convening four witnesses, who represented a variety of perspectives. She opened the hearing by recognizing that protecting religious freedom benefits women. "From respecting a woman's right to practice her faith free from legal guardianship restrictions in Saudi Arabia to protecting Uyghur, Rohingya, and Yazidi women targeted with torture and sexual violence because of their ethnoreligious identities in China, Burma, Iraq, and Syria, respectively, protecting freedom of religion or belief has significant positive impacts on the lives of women around the world," she stated.



USCIRF Vice Chair [Nury Turkel](#) emphasized that women's impact on religious freedom has been varied and wide-reaching. "In Pakistan and Russia, women demand the repeal of blasphemy and apostasy laws. In Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, women advocate for the legal right to interpret Islamic texts and traditions through their own gender-inclusive lens," he said. "In Sudan, women played an integral role in ending an authoritarian regime that placed significant restrictions on religious practice and discourse. In countries as diverse as Kenya, Syria, and Mali, women lead efforts to combat violent extremism, reduce hate, and foster interfaith tolerance through dialogue and social services, often at great personal risk."



[Rita Stephan](#), then Regional Coordinator for Religious and Ethnic Minorities at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), discussed how the U.S. government incorporates the specific needs and experiences of women to

protect FoRB.

- USAID’s work in the Middle East brings into focus the interconnectivity between the free exercise of one’s religion and the inclusion of women as equal citizens.
- USAID programs support women throughout the region, specifically in Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen, and Iraq. These programs address the enabling environment and focus on inclusion dialogue, advocacy, and strengthening laws, policies, and regulations to ensure that women within the diverse communities have the space to assume leadership roles.
- In northern Iraq, after the defeat of ISIS, USAID worked with the Catholic University at Erbil to provide support for women from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds to economically integrate them and help build sustainable communities.
- USAID partners with organizations such as the Jiyan Foundation, which offers mental health and psychosocial support to Yazidi victims of ISIS. The Foundation’s Youth Network for Peace and Dialogue offers a safe space for young girls to speak freely of their experiences and learn the perspectives of youth from different religions and backgrounds.



[Dr. Nazila Ghanea](#), Associate Professor of International Human Rights Law at the University of Oxford and author of USCIRF’s 2017 report, [Women and Religious Freedom: Synergies and Opportunities](#), provided an overview of the intersection and

opportunities for protecting women’s rights and freedom of religion or belief:

- International human rights law recognizes the full and equal human rights of women and girls in every international human rights instrument.
- Women and girls’ enjoyment of rights is critical in and of itself but has positive effects on societal progress and economic well-being, and plays a critical role in ensuring peace and security. Yet, religion itself has been used as justification for violating the most basic rights of women and girls, including in the international human rights fora.

- Article 5.1 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights says nothing allows states, groups, or persons to destroy any other rights and freedoms.
- Freedom of religion or belief allows us to understand, interpret, and apply the provisions of our religion or belief in our daily lives, but it does not allow us to impose our standards on others.
- USCIRF’s report *Women and Religious Freedom: Synergies and Opportunities* encouraged the building of bridges between women’s rights and freedom of religion or belief advocacy. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) committee itself has emboldened its efforts in interrogating states’ claims of religious justifications for not respecting the rights of women and girls using the Faith for Rights framework to leverage the moral weight of religions and beliefs to strengthen the protection of universal human rights and preventive strategies.

“Freedom of religion or belief, as Heiner Bielefeldt said, is aimed at the empowerment of human beings as individuals and in community with others,” Dr. Ghanea said in her closing statement. “Let’s not weaponize it against dignity, equality, and human rights.”



[Dr. Azza Karam](#), Secretary-General of Religions for Peace and Founder of the Multi-Faith Advisory Council of the United Nations Interagency Task Force, declared that freedom of religion and belief can be a tool to empower people in their struggles for

gender equality and non-discrimination, and should not be used to justify violations of women’s rights or the rights of the LGBTQ+ community.

- Freedom of religion or belief is about protecting the rights of individuals and groups to have, adopt, or change a religion or belief, free of coercion and discrimination. FoRB is not about the protection of conservative or patriarchal religious traditions and values.
- The universality of human rights must translate into FoRB protection for individuals from all religious communities rather than the current tendency, including among those well-meaning sectors, to focus on particular religious minorities over others.

- Discrimination comes in many forms. Persecuted religious minorities themselves may be highly discriminatory and oppressive towards those who differ from their mainstream views, whether feminist theologians, people who advocate for democracy, advocates for other human rights, or those who believe in no religion.

Dr. Karam recommended the U.S. government:

- Support both religious leaders and faith leaders with a proven track record of working with diverse local entities and delivering human rights goals;
- Ensure multi-religious literacy to understand the nuances in multi-religious policy work;
- Integrate FoRB in the efforts to promote democracy, development, and peacebuilding; and
- Work with intergovernmental entities such as the United Nations to increase the credibility of its human rights work.



*Palwasha Kakar*, Interim Director of the Religion and Inclusive Societies Program at the United States Institute of Peace, shared the stories of women peacebuilding activists.

In Syria, when the conservative militia fighting the Assad regime rounded up and detained community members, three women religious leaders instinctively reached out to each other. Hind, a prominent Christian and lay leader in her church, and Asma and Nour, recognized Muslim religious leaders and teachers of the Quran, contacted the leaders of the militant group. They started a mediation process to find and urge those who have leverage and influence to pressure members of the militant group. The alliances sought across faiths secured the release of their community members.

Tatiana, a researcher on the role of religion in Ukraine, facilitated dialogue sessions with priests of the Russian Orthodox churches and Ukrainian autocephalous Orthodox churches. She facilitated dialogue between chaplains across the lines of conflict in the Donbas region to foster greater understanding and respect for each other's differences of faith to prevent violence.

In Afghanistan, when a law was introduced in parliament to limit Shi'a women's rights, Sunni Muslim and Sikh women parliamentarians and activists joined the protests and advocacy efforts to stop the bill from passing.

In Burma, Suii Chitt, a woman from the Buddhist order, reached out to Muslim women during rising tensions between religious groups following a fire. They began a dialogue between Buddhist monks, Muslim imams, and community leaders to identify and work toward community goals.

Ms. Kakar recommended the U.S. government:

- Consult activists and religious women at the local level to fully understand religious freedom conditions and to better understand the contours of conflict;
- Ask local communities when pressure from the U.S. government is helpful and which issues the U.S. government should publicly support, since it is important to recognize that some religious women are more successful without being internationally distinguished; and
- Enable funding and support for the breadth of diversity of religious women's contributions to freedom of religion or belief.

Among the recommendations to the U.S. government that emerged during the hearing with broad consensus among witnesses were to: 1) incorporate an analysis of religious freedom conditions into the implementation of the U.S. Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security; 2) continue intra- and interagency analysis of women's rights in countries where freedom of religion or belief is threatened; and 3) strengthen engagement with women, including women faith leaders, in the U.S. government's engagement with religious and civil society actors around issues of women's rights and issues of international religious freedom.



## UNITED STATES COMMISSION *on* INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

The Commissioners listed below were present at the hearing.



*Chair*  
*Nadine Maenza*



*Vice Chair*  
*Nury Turkel*



*Commissioner*  
*Anurima Bhargava*



*Commissioner*  
*Frederick A. Davie*



*Commissioner*  
*Khizr Khan*

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) is an independent, bipartisan federal government entity established by the U.S. Congress to monitor, analyze, and report on religious freedom abroad. USCIRF makes foreign policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and Congress intended to deter religious persecution and promote freedom of religion and belief.